



The Bob Baker Marionette Theater

by Caitlan Carroll

LOS ANGELES—In a small cement building on the edge of downtown Los Angeles a master puppeteer is at work. Bob Baker has run his marionette theater here for the past 60 years.

“Most people don’t even know this place exists,” Baker says. “Now they’re just slowly beginning to find out where we are.”

Baker made his first marionettes while studying at Hollywood High School in the 1930s. After serving in World War II, he came back and worked for the Walt Disney animation studios. Soon he returned to his first love and began touring the world with his one-of-a-kind puppet shows.

In the 1960s, Baker and his partner Alton Wood bought a scenic shop in Echo Park and transformed it into the theater it is today. Now he tours schools and county fairs and also runs weekly in-house performances with a crew of fellow puppeteers.

“I saw him when I was little,” says Cathy Sturdivant. “He used to play in Lancaster when I was in nursery school.”

Sturdivant arrived this afternoon to see “Something to Crow About”—the first show performed at the Bob Baker Marionette Theater when it opened decades ago.

Today’s matinee drew kids, parents, and a few couples on dates.

Enrique Valdez surprised his girlfriend Lucia Morano with tickets this afternoon. He says that after driving by the theater for years, he finally decided to check it out.

“I asked what we were going to be doing and he said, ‘just be a kid,’” says Morano.

That seems to be the thread that connects Baker’s diverse audiences and various show themes.

Baker says to “leave the messages to Western Union.” He thinks people should just be able to have a good time once in awhile.

“You see these people who probably would never think about going to a puppet show laughing and kidding and almost acting like school children sometimes,” Baker says.

Although ticket sales are on an upswing, times have not always been easy at the theater. During Los Angeles' riots in the 1990s, Baker says people broke in, "burned things and tore down our banners." He says the violence in the area scared away his faithful customers from the old Hollywood community and families from the Westside.

At "Something to Crow About," the crowd cheers as new dolled up animals and vegetables take the stage—each deftly controlled by the puppeteers' strings. The kids especially love an artistic rabbit who paints noses with imaginary flavors, and the tap dancing watermelons are a hit too.

When the curtain falls kids rush to the party room for ice cream and the verdict comes in.

"I though it was just great," says one five-year-old.

Four-year-old Kaylee Berhard says, "I love the beautiful singing." Most of the music in Baker's shows comes from the 1920's and 30's.

A parent standing nearby agrees with the kids. "It really needs to be advertised so much more. It's better than movies. Live entertainment like that, it can't be beat."

The Bob Baker Theater runs weekly shows. More information is available at www.bobbakermarionettes.com.